

# The Snake Chief

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NANDI WAS VERY POOR. Her husband was dead and she had no sons to herd cattle and only one daughter to help in the fields.

In summer, when the umdoni trees were full of creamy flowers, she and her daughter dug for amadumbe to eat with their maize porridge. But in autumn, when the flowers had died, she collected the umdoni berries, purple and sweet, and gave them to her neighbours in return for strips of dried goat meat or calabashes of thick and creamy sour milk.

One hot day Nandi went down to the river as usual to gather the purple berries, but nothing could she find. Not a single berry was to be seen – not one.

Just then she heard a loud hissing, a loud and terrible hissing. Looking up, she saw a great green-eyed snake wound round and round the dark red trunk of the tree, his head swaying among the branches. He was eating all the berries.

“You are stealing my berries,” she called. “Oh, Snake, you are stealing all my berries. What will I have to exchange for meat if you take all the fruit?”

Snake hissed again and started to slither down the trunk. Nandi was afraid, but if she ran away there would be no berries for her.

“What will you give me in exchange for the umdoni berries?” he hissed. “If I fill your basket, will you give me your daughter?”

“Yes,” cried Nandi, “I’ll give you my daughter this very night. Only let me fill my basket with the purple fruit.”

But once her basket was full and Nandi was on her way home she began to tremble at what she had promised. How could she give her daughter to such an ugly creature? She must make sure that Snake did not find out where she lived. She must not go straight home lest he were watching.

She crossed the river where the water ran shallow over the rocks and made her way into the bush on the other bank, silently slipping

between the thorn trees. She did not know that a long thorn had scratched her leather skirt and that a tiny piece of leather was left caught on a tree.

She made her way carefully and silently through the reeds, keeping an eye open for Crocodile, and waded through the deep pool. She did not know that a plump, purple berry had fallen from her basket and was floating behind her in the water.

She crept towards a huge ant-hill. Once she was behind that, she could not possibly be seen from the umdoni trees. But she caught her foot in the entrance to Waterrat’s secret tunnel. She did not know that she left three beads from her anklet lying in the soft brown earth.

At last she reached her hut and cried out to her daughter, “My child, I have done an evil deed. I have promised you to Snake in return for this basket of purple fruit.” And she burst into tears.

Meanwhile Snake had slithered down the tree to follow Nandi. This way and that his head swayed, until he saw the little piece of leather on the thorn and he knew which way to go.

This way and that his head swayed again, until he saw a ripe, purple berry floating in the deep pool and he knew which way to go.

This way and that his head swayed once more, until he saw three beads lying at the mouth of Waterrat’s tunnel and he knew which way to go.

Just as Nandi burst into tears, there was a loud hissing at the entrance to her hut and Snake slid in, coiling his long green-grey body.

“No! No!” cried Nandi. “I did not mean my promise. I cannot give you my daughter.”

The young girl looked up. Her dark brown eyes were gentle and quite fearless.

“A promise is a promise, Mother,” she said. “You must surely give me to Snake.” She put out her hand and stroked his green-grey head. “Come,” she said, “I will find you some food.”

And she fetched a calabash full of thick and creamy sour milk for him to drink. Then she folded her blanket and made a bed for her snake master.

During the night Nandi stirred. What had wakened her? Had Leopard coughed? Had Hyena sung to the moon? Something had disturbed her. She listened again. Voices. She could hear voices. That was her daughter speaking. But whose was that other voice? That deep, strong voice?

Silently she crept from her skin blankets. What did she see? Was she still asleep and dreaming? Sitting with her daughter was a handsome young man, tall, brown and strong. Surely a chief's son, perhaps even a chief. Her daughter was making a bead necklace, weaving a wedding pattern with the multicoloured beads. And the young man was talking gently and lovingly to her as she worked.

Nandi looked at the folded blanket where Snake had been put to rest. On it lay a long, coiled green-grey skin. She snatched it up and flung it into the fire that burned low in the middle of the hut.

"Now is the spell broken," spoke the snake chief. "For a virtuous girl took pity on me and a foolish old woman has burned my skin." But in spite of his harsh words he smiled gently at Nandi.



Nandi now has three grandchildren – a boy to herd the cattle on the veld and two girls to help her hoe the weeds from among the maize plants and to dig for amadumbe. She no longer needs to gather umdoni berries, for there is enough food for all.



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